DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 173 SP 036 760

AUTHOR Yeh, Christine J.; Krumboltz, John D.
TITLE The Impact of a Non-Competitive Grading System on Learning.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Competition; Educational Philosophy; Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; *Grading; Higher Education; Schools of Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Evaluation; *Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS Stanford University CA

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on student responses from a survey examining the impact of an experimental, non-competitive evaluation policy on student learning. The policy, implemented at Stanford University for a course examining cultural differences in career and personnel counseling, encouraged students to engage actively in class, learn from each other, explore ideas creatively, and take risks without the pressure to please the professor. The survey investigating the impact of the grading policy on student motivation and course involvement was distributed to 13 students during the second and the last week of the course. The data revealed that the students were generally very supportive of the non-competitive grading policy. Students indicated the course encouraged them to: concentrate on meaningful learning, learn from other students as well as the professor, be more creative in exploring their thinking, and take risks that challenged and empowered them. Numerous activities (such as culture day, the newsgroup, cross-cultural counseling, and final presentations) complemented the course's goal to encourage student to learn and engage in class in a meaningful way. (ND)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

The Impact of a Non-Competitive Grading System on Learning

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Yeh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Christine J. Yeh
John D. Krumboltz
Stanford University School of Education

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 398 173

This paper reviews student responses from a survey examining the impact of an experimental evaluation policy on student learning. This non-competitive policy was implemented at Stanford University School of Education for a course examining cultural difference in career and personal counseling entitled, *Career and Personal Counseling in Culturally Diverse Settings.*

Methods of student evaluation can greatly influence student involvement, attitude and behavior in a particular course. The evaluation policy in the *Career and Personal Counseling in Culturally Diverse Settings* course was non-competitive. This course philosophy was implemented to encourage students to engage actively in class, to learn from each other, to explore ideas creatively and to take risks and challenge themselves without the pressure to please the professor or the fear of punishment.

Overall, this grading policy made no comparative judgments among students, it encouraged student improvement in learning and counseling and it rewarded an "A" grade when students invested a %100 effort to improve their learning. The formal description of this policy was described and explained to the students on the first day of class by the professor as follows:

> *"Our grading policy is based on cognitive-behavioral theory. We want you to exert every reasonable effort to attain the course objectives in a way that results in their making sense to you. We have no interest in making comparative judgments among students. We want you to improve as much as you can in the time allotted. An "A" grade will be earned by each student who attends every class session, reads critically every assigned selection, completes every assignment on time, responds weekly to postings on the Newsgroup, attends every lab session, participates meaningfully in class discussions, makes every reasonable effort to help a "client" and does a good*

SP036760

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

job of teaching something useful to fellow classmates."

The impact of the above grading policy on student motivation and course involvement was investigated using a survey distributed to students at the beginning and end of the academic quarter. Students in this course responded to two questions: "How much does this grading policy motivates you to do your best work." and "How does this grading policy effect your thinking as you approach the course requirements?"

This survey was distributed and collected using E-Mail on the Internet which was convenient for the respondents and did not disrupt class time. All of the students in the class had access to a computer with a modem and were familiar with using E-mail from other class assignments. A Teaching Assistant from the previous year's course was selected to collect the data on the Internet since she was not presently involved in the course and could assure confidentiality from all other members of the course, the Professor and the current Teaching Assistant.

The survey was distributed on the second and last week of the academic quarter. Of the thirteen students enrolled in the class, 11 responded to the first polling and 10 responded to the second. Overall, the students reported that they enjoyed being surveyed on the Internet since they could take more time to contemplate the evaluation questions and could reply at their convenience. All of the evaluations were then read and coded for main themes in the feedback.

The students, generally, were very supportive of the non-competitive grading policy for four main reasons. Overall, students believed that this evaluation policy; allowed them to concentrate on learning that was meaningful to them; it removed the fear of taking risks in class participation. This policy also encouraged students to teach as well as learn from their fellow students and finally, this policy promoted student creativity in learning

With a non-competitive grading policy, students were encouraged to not only learn from the professor but from fellow students as well. This freedom in learning allowed students to discern what material was the most important for them to

understand. Selections from student surveys are utilized here to illuminate the positive impact of non-competitive grading on student learning. The first quotes exemplify how this evaluation policy encouraged meaningful learning:

Example 1

> *"This grading policy gives me the freedom to explore the material without worrying about what the instructor wants me to learn! This policy makes it easier to learn."*

Example 2

> *"This non-competitive grading policy motivates me greatly! Not having to worry that what I am going to write is going to be judged and then graded allows me the freedom to truly address issues that are of concern to me. It also permits me to get to the heart of the matter without having to worry to much about stroking anyone's ego. In general, such an open policy allows me to function to my fullest intellectual capacity."*

Example 3

> *"Having this policy frees me from having to worry about what the instructor "expects" or "wants" from me. This way I can pursue my own personal interests within the framework of the class without fear of being penalized."*

Example 4

> *"The grading policy is very empowering for me as a student. I learn from the class and I'm active and contribute in a way that I feel comfortable with, and yet being comfortable does not mean that I am not challenged. On the contrary, being comfortable means that I can push myself and feel safe that my grade will not be lowered, I will not be punished if I take risks that don't end up in success."*

As described in these passages, this grading policy encouraged students to learn from each other as well as from the professor. Since this course examined cultural differences in counseling, and since all class members came in with differing world views, learning from each other, exchanging world views and self-exploration were crucial aspects of growing and learning about cultural differences.

This grading policy contributed to an environment in which students could learn from each others views and experiences while also being empowered to educate and challenge other members in the class.

Non-competitive grading also allowed students to explore their interests and be creative in their class exercises, assignments and participation. Here are some examples of how this grading policy encouraged creativity:

Example 5

> *"I'll say that not having to be concerned about the dumb grades frees me up to be more creative in my thinking. This evaluation method actually relieves some of the pressure caused by grade evaluation. I hate that old way of evaluating. I am always motivated to do my best I can given the time we have to do a project/assignment. I'm an adult and should be motivated to think creatively and innovatively."*

Example 6

> *"It frees me up from thinking, "oh gee, what does the professor want to see?" and allows me to think more creatively. It also removes the competitiveness factor, which I think gets in the way of exploration and learning."*

Example 7

> *"At this point in my career - being normed on some grading system probably would stifle my creativity more than anything else. I haven't a need to be graded in comparison to others - that aspect of competitiveness was left behind a few graduate degrees ago. Keep up the system. It works for me!"*

Students were especially creative in their approach to the required course assignments. For example, at the end of the quarter, all of the students in class were required to give a final presentation during which they taught something different and interesting to the other members of the course. These style and content of these final presentations clearly demonstrate how the students were encouraged to engage

creatively in class.

Examples of student final presentations include:

1). An exercise in Rational-Emotive Therapy's A-B-C theory of Emotional Disturbance. This presentation included a role play and exercise for students in reframing situations.

2). An examination how music has influenced our perceptions of career and work. This student made an audio tape of various popular songs that depicted specific societal attitudes towards work and led a class discussion on how work attitudes and behaviors are shaped.

3). A lecture describing the statistics and an historical overview of physically challenged clients that included a role play of a counseling session with a physically challenged client.

4). A presentation on the coming out process for gay clients and students in the class participated in a role play exercise that simulated a counseling session with a gay client coming out for the first time.

5). Another creative effort, included a video of counselors as portrayed in popular films. This student edited numerous film clips of counseling and psychotherapy sessions in film and discussed the do's and don'ts of counseling.

While the final presentations were very original, their creative, non-competitive and open-ended format was anxiety provoking for one student in the class. Although students' responses to the grading policy were overall very positive, one student did experience some anxiety over the fairness over the non-competitive grading policy for Career and Personal Counseling in Culturally Diverse Settings. She responded to the grading policy survey by writing the following passage:

Example 8

> *"Something that has really bothered me these past few weeks was the final presentation. I put some work and effort into my presentation and learned something personally from it. I do not feel that everyone put the same amount of energy and thought into their project, and because there is no quality expectation/evaluation, this was apparently perfectly fine. Perhaps it is unfair of me to make content evaluations about the worth of the projects but it seemed obvious that some people had really taken the easy way out in their final presentations. I think that perhaps some of the projects need to be pre-approved or something. Or perhaps graded by class feedback or something to hold people more accountable. I would be interested to know how much time people put into their projects. I suspect it would range from 5 minutes to 5-6 hours."*

It is apparent that it was difficult for this student to not compare herself with her fellow students and thus a non-competitive grading system was anxiety provoking. Since she was apparently accustomed to being ranked with other students, the thought of everyone getting the same grade was difficult to accept as fair. It seems as if previous traditional grading policies have distracted this student from the goal of learning and have instead encouraged competitive judging.

A final theme that emerged from the student surveys was that student fear of taking risks in class activities and participation was reduced from this particular grading policy. Students seemed more comfortable taking chances (i.e., speaking more in class, expressing or debating their opinion, asking provocative questions) in their learning when the threat of punishment was gone. Here are two examples of student responses that emphasize the importance of risk taking in learning:

Example 9

> *"I was very motivated by this grading system because it emphasized learning rather than grades. A number of assignments involve risk taking (News group, culture day and the final exam/presentation). Often times, the threat of grades and comparisons interferes with individuals'*

ability to take risks. Risk taking helps students face challenges and thus learn and grow."

Example 10

"I like the grading policy in that it frees students up to take more risks. Since this course offers students the opportunity to be creative (e.g. culture day, final exam), they may be more likely to take risks knowing that their grade does not depend on their success."

Overall the non-competitive grading policy implemented in the *Career and Personal Counseling in Culturally Diverse Settings* course encouraged students to: concentrate on meaningful learning, learn from other students as well as the professor, be more creative in exploring their thinking and take risks that will challenge and empower them. These qualities of the course were not only apparent in the grading policy and course philosophy, but also in the assignments. Numerous activities in the course (such as culture day, the newsgroup, cross-cultural counseling and final presentations) complemented this course's goal to encourage students to learn and engage in class in a meaningful way.